Are Beliefs about God are Central to the Self?
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Research findings emerging from our lab indicate that God-beliefs have a relatively unique influence on people’s self-concept (i.e., their sense of self). This line of work is based on the notion that the self-concept is comprised of people’s beliefs about their own characteristics and qualities, as well as beliefs about the world (Epstein, 1973; Koltko-Rivera, 2004). Importantly, some beliefs people have about themselves are more important than other beliefs; some are more central to their identity (Chen, Urminsky, & Bartels, 2016; Stinson, Wood, & Doxey, 2008). For example, one may value their identity as “parent” more than other qualities (“talkative”), characteristics (“tall”), or roles (“cousin”) that are part of one’s identity (Crocker & Park, 2003). Likewise, beliefs about the world also differ in psychological value. In particular, those beliefs that provide powerful explanations for reality are more personal, relevant, and meaningful than beliefs with less explanatory power (Preston & Epley, 2005). Beliefs about God, beliefs in scientific explanations, and beliefs associated with government are examples of these kinds of high-value beliefs because they offer frameworks by which people make sense of the world (Kay, Whitson, Gaucher, & Galinsky, 2009). Taken together, then, if the self, in part, consists of important beliefs that provide an explanation for reality, then beliefs about God, politics, or science might play a central—even critical, self-defining—psychological role.

Research from our lab, however, shows that God-beliefs are related to self-concept clarity (SCC)—the perception that one has a clear, cohesive, and consistent sense of self—in a way not seen with beliefs about politics or science (Kitchens & Phillips, in press). Specifically, in a series of three studies, we found a significant curvilinear relationship between people’s beliefs about God and SCC, showing that those with the clearest beliefs about God (at both ends of belief) had the clearest self-concept. Subsequent studies showed that strongly held political beliefs (Study 2) and beliefs about science (Study 3) were not related to SCC in a linear or curvilinear fashion, even though God-beliefs continued to be related to SCC in a U-shaped relationship.

Based on these results, we’ve speculated that God-beliefs are more central—more important, relevant, or meaningful to the self—than other worldview beliefs. To test this, we randomly assigned a student sample (N = 53) to describe their beliefs about God, politics, a
college education, or to describe their most important belief. Following this, they rated several items that assessed the importance and relevance of these beliefs to their daily lives.

We reasoned that students’ beliefs about a college education and their self-identified most important belief would serves as a baseline for self-relevant, meaningful beliefs. As such, if God-beliefs were uncommonly related to the self in ways other world-views are not, then the self-relevance of participants’ beliefs about God should be rated as similarly self-relevant as students’ beliefs about college and their most important belief, but political beliefs would be significantly less self-relevant than these beliefs. We conducted a planned comparison analysis and confirmed this pattern. We also conducted an analysis of covariance, controlling for participants’ sense of self and belief in the existence of God, and found that there was a significant difference across conditions, showing again that God-beliefs, but not political beliefs, were rated as similarly self-relevant to students’ beliefs about a college education and their most important belief.

Taken together, these studies provide initial evidence that beliefs about God influence the way in which people think about themselves that is not seen with other worldviews. Furthermore, this study indicates that participants are explicitly aware that God-beliefs are more self-relevant than beliefs about their political worldview. Further work needs to be done to directly test the centrality of these beliefs, but this initial test provides evidence that participants perceive the self-relevance of God-beliefs in ways similar to other aspects of their lives that are self-relevant.
References


